AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS

1.   (currently amended) A tunnel designator~~system~~ to couple tunnel servers to tunnel clients executing host applications for use in a virtual private network (VPN) environment, said tunnel designator not being one of said tunnel servers and comprising:

(a)   a receiver that receives requests from host applications executing on the tunnel clients, the requests addressed to at least one of the tunnel servers~~the tunnel coupling system~~ to establish a VPN tunnel;

(b)   a processor that processes the requests, the processor also maintaining ~~and~~ an indication of loads on the tunnel servers, the processor operative to establish the VPN tunnels by designating at least one of the tunnel servers to each of the requests~~ed tunnel~~; and

(c)   a tunnel traffic distributor that distributes tunnel traffic to the tunnel servers based at least part on the designations.

2.   (currently amended) The ~~system~~ tunnel designator of claim 1~~, and~~ further comprising:

(a)   an evaluation processor that evaluates the tunnel traffic before the tunnel traffic distributor distributes the tunnel traffic to the tunnel servers.

3.   (currently amended) The ~~system~~ tunnel designator of claim 2, wherein the evaluation performed by the evaluation processor includes at least performing security functions on the tunnel traffic.

4.   (currently amended) The tunnel designator ~~system~~ of claim 1, wherein:

(a)   the ~~request~~ processor establishes the VPN tunnel by, in part, associating each VPN tunnel with characteristics of tunnel traffic for that VPN tunnel; and

(b)   the tunnel traffic distributor operates in part based on the associations, without involvement of the host applications.

5.   (new) A method of connecting a plurality of tunnel clients to a plurality of tunnel servers using a tunnel designator, the method comprising:

using said tunnel designator to receive a request from one of said tunnel clients;

determining if said request is a valid request from one of said tunnel clients;

determining if said request is for a new tunnel, and

    if so:

    (a) opening a new tunnel to a selected one of said tunnel servers; and

    (b) modifying an address map to include information associating said selected one of said tunnel servers to said request;

    if not:

    (b) using said address map to route said request to a mapped tunnel server.